A JAPANESE MASTERPIECE AND ITS SOURCES

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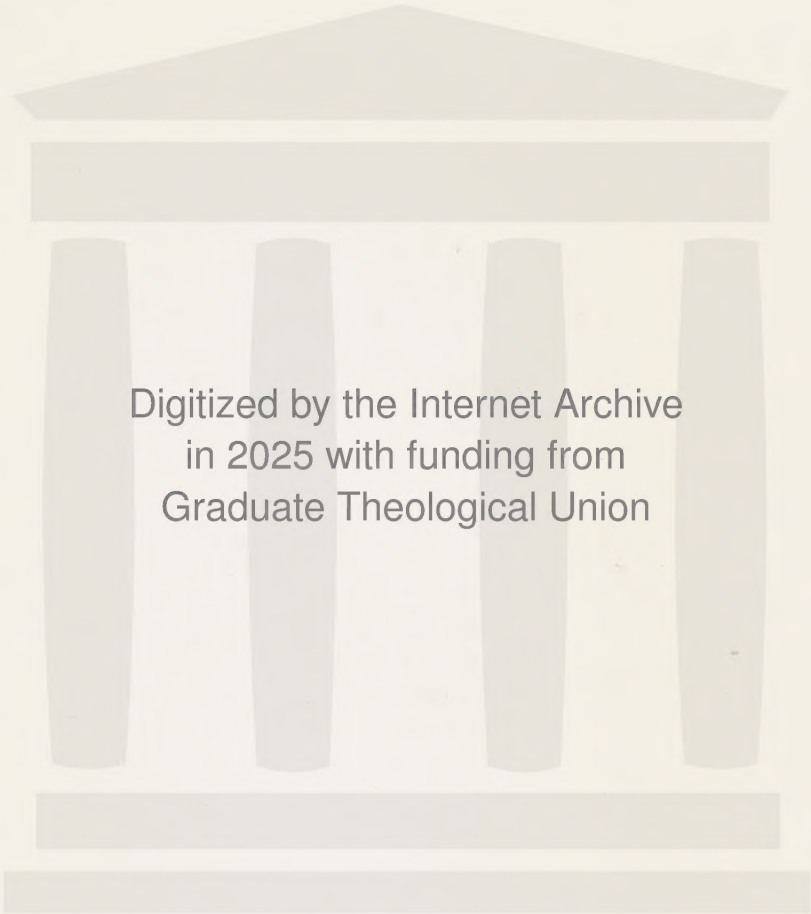
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THE WOODEN STATUE OF KWANNON AT CHUGUJI (NEAR NARA)

Early Sixth Century

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A JAPANESE MASTERPIECE AND ITS SOURCES

KENNETH SAUNDERS

The Chinese have a proverbial saying "Kwanyin in every family." This means that the divine mercy of the Buddha is everywhere, and ever ready to help: and the proverb itself is an indication of how widely Buddhist influence has spread in China. There is no figure more familiar or beloved alike in China, Korea, and Japan than that of Kwanyin, the Compassionate. Almost the earliest great work of religious art in Japan is the beautiful wooden statue in the nunnery of Chuguji near Nara. It is attributed to the great Shōtoku Taishi, who is the real founder of Japanese Buddhism; and of it Fenollosa says, "the greatest masterpiece of Suiko art . . . . dominates the whole room like an actual presence. . . . This finely imaginative work, whose genius we can trace from the suggestions of preceding models, is clearly the work of an original master mind . . . . the first great creative Japanese work of art in the matter of spiritual power."[1]

The latest work of religious genius which Japan has produced is also a figure of Kwanyin. It is by Kāno Hōgai, the last of the great family which flourished for five centuries in Japan. He died in 1888, with his masterpiece apparently unfinished (he had made several studies of it); and Japanese critics have accepted it as a work of original genius.

Dr. M. Anesaki, who reproduces it in his *Buddhist Art*, calls it "the chief work of the unique genius of Kāno Hōgai." In it we see this compassionate Mother looking down upon the newborn soul as it descends, in the frail bark of a bubble,

[1] *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, vol. 1, pp. 63–64.

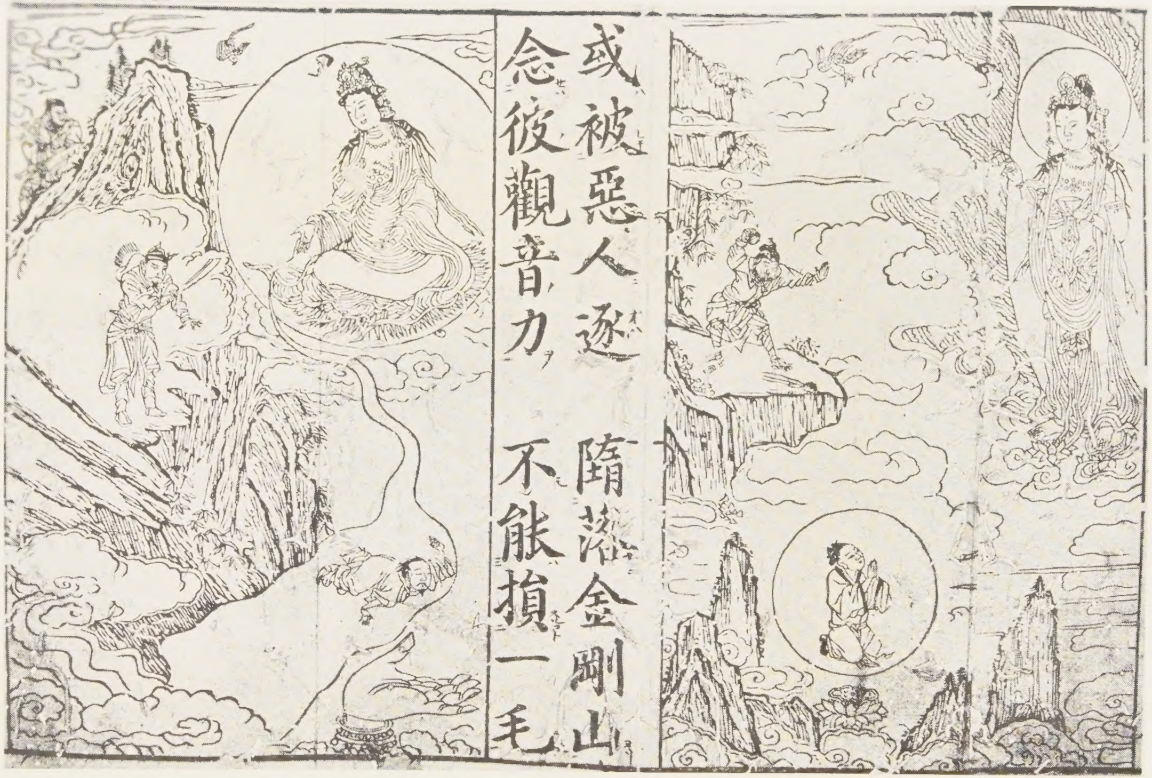
among the dark valleys and sharp crags of human life. When I first saw this famous work I questioned alike its originality and its genius; except in so far as the idea of the child floating down in a soap bubble goes, it seemed to me one of an endless series of such works. The figure of the goddess is conventional, and models for it might be found as far back as the ninth and tenth centuries in the caves of Tung Huang. These caves indeed form a very important link between the art of India and that of the Far East; and even to details of drapery the prototype of such works is there, and can be traced back thence to Ajanta in western India. Eastern Art, in fact, like Buddhism itself, can only be understood by those who study the Indian beginnings. Kwanyin is of course Kwan-she-yin, which is Chinese for "the Lord who looks down," Avalokiteśvara—an Indian, or maybe a Persian, deity.

The classical account of this Lord of Compassion is in the twenty-ninth section of the "Lotus" Scripture, the Saddharma Pundarīka, or "Essence of the True Law." And the artists have been careful students of it. Having occasion to look up an early edition of this great work I chanced upon, through the courtesy of a professor in the Ryukoku Buddhist University of Kyōto, a volume printed in the Sung dynasty edition of the Chinese canon. Its date is about the fourteenth century; and it is elaborately illustrated with wood blocks—an art in which the Chinese have excelled, at any rate since the ninth century, as is proved by the discoveries at Tun Huang.

Among the illustrations, which depict the goddess appearing to men in various dangers and difficulties, "perils by sea and land," is the original from which Kāno Hōgai clearly got his idea of the child newly born receiving the blessing of Kwanyin. When I showed a photograph of this illustration to Dr. Anesaki, he agreed that the similarity was too great to be due to chance, and a comparison of the finished work of the great Japanese master and of the early Chinese artisan should prove of interest to artists and to all students of Asiatic culture. Putting these two works of art side by

KĀNO HŌGAI'S KWANNON

Late Nineteenth Century



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TWO ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE SUNG DYNASTY EDITION OF THE LOTUS SCRIPTURE

Thirteenth to Fourteenth Century

The second is the chief source of Kāno Hōgai's masterpiece. In the first note the hand rising from the sea to help the suppliant.

side, it at once becomes clear that the Japanese elaborated, and in elaborating often weakened, the subjects which had been handled more simply and boldly by the Chinese. Anyone who goes to the Imperial Art School of Tokyo may see Kāno Hōgai's masterpiece. Many will find in it, as a large and representative group of women were finding in it when I last saw it, a work of spiritual power and genius. It is, I think, well suited for some Lady Chapel! For men it is rather "too sweet." In its delicate coloring and rather sentimental charm it compares ill with the early masterpieces like that at Chuguji, and those which came in from Korea and from China in the early days. A visit to the museum at Nara will, I think, convince the sincere student of art that the Japanese did their greatest work when they were under the direct inspiration of Korea and of China: in sculpture they soon surpassed their teachers, and, for a brief century or two Japanese Buddhism, and with it Japanese art, had its springtide. Since then Buddhism has occasionally revived, as it is reviving today, and with its revival there have been some notable awakenings of art. But on the whole these later paintings and sculptures are to the authentic genius of the early masterpieces as the florid and elaborate shrines of Nikko are to the strong simplicity and serene beauty of Hōriuji and of Todaiji.

The texts from the Lotus Scripture which are illustrated in the accompanying plate are the following:

> If a man be hurled from the brink of a precipice by a villain who seeks to slay him—let him but think of Avaloliketesvara, and he shall stand firm as the Sun in heaven.
>
> If rocks and stones are hurled at him to kill him he has but to think of Avalokitesvara, and not a hair of him shall be hurt.

No wonder that, as he sought for a popular and universal form of Buddhism which might inspire his people and unite them in harmony, the great Shōtoku seized upon the Lotus Scripture. A commentary on it in his own hand is preserved among the Imperial treasures of Japan, and contemporary pictures show us this great statesman, who has left such

monuments as Horiuji to tell us of his love of the beautiful, preaching to a grateful people the great lessons that the Buddha is the Father of all, that all can become Buddhas, and that the spirit of compassion, which is the divine spirit, can be embodied in human lives.

With all its complexities Buddhism has remained true to this spirit, which is the spirit of its founder, Sākyamuni.

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